

The Universe: An Elizabethan View

Elizabethans believed in an absolutely ordered universe in which all things could be clearly ranked in order of superiority. This "common sense" view corresponded with their religious beliefs, political system, and limited scientific understanding. General Being could be divided and ranked as shown in the column at the right.

God
Angels
Man
Animals
Plants
Inorganic matter
Chaos

King or Queen
Nobility
Knights
Gentlemen
Professions and Trades
Peasants

Within these individual categories, further subdivisions could also be made. For example, the sun was the superior planet, the lion the highest animal, gold the chief metal, and men were superior to women. "Man" could be subdivided and ranked as shown in the column at the left, and each subdivision could be further subdivided.

Macbeth reflects the Elizabethan concern with seeing and maintaining order. In Act I, the universe is clearly ordered:

God
Angels
Duncan
Malcolm
Other Nobles
(including Macbeth, Macduff,
Banquo)
Knights
Gentlemen
Peasants
Animals
Plants
Inorganic matter
Chaos

When Macbeth kills Duncan between scenes 1 and 2 of Act II, he violates this order, which is not restored until the end of the play. Thus, killing the king is not just a personal nor just a social action; it is a cosmic crime, and the universe reflects the disorder Macbeth initiates.

On the back of the sheet list examples of disorder reported by The Old Man, Ross, and Macduff in Act II, Scene 4.

Macbeth plays several roles in the play and each role illustrates a different aspect of his character. As you read and study the play, list those character traits you find in Macbeth as he plays three different roles.

General	Husband	King

The Geography of Macbeth

